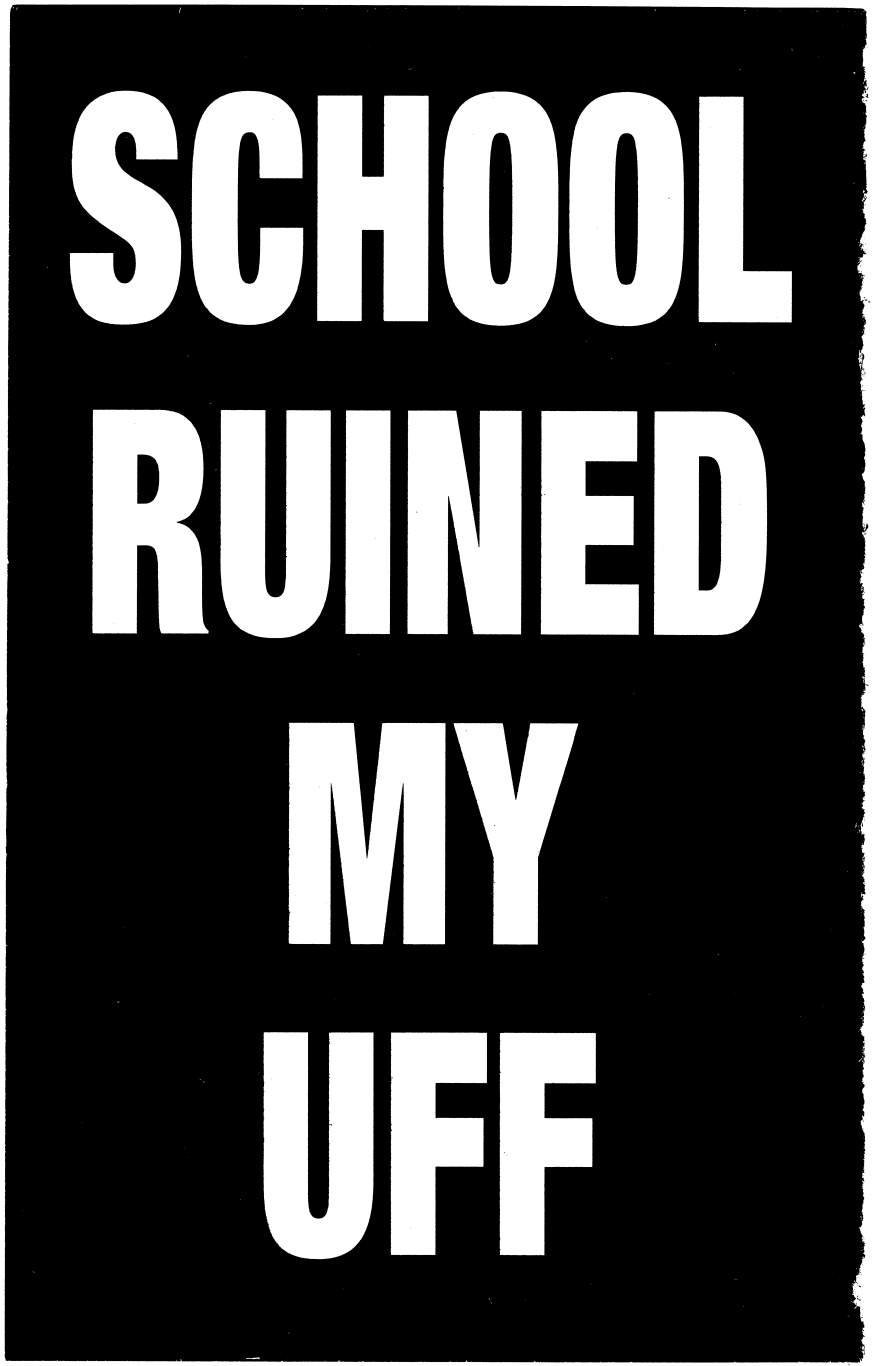

SCHOOL
RUINED
MY
UFF

Shanzhai Lyric (SL)

Shanzhai Lyric is a "poetic research and archival unit" that documents and transforms awkwardly translated slogans from Chinese bootleg T-shirts into an ongoing poem. The term "shanzhai" originated during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) and translates to "mountain fortress," referring to camps of bandits located on the outskirts of cities beyond government control. Today, however, the word describes an array of Chinese counterfeit products, from cellphones to designer shoes to bootleg shirts. In their practice, Shanzhai Lyric presents their growing archive of garments online through Instagram as well as in physical form through various interventions including publications, performance-lectures, and installations.

In 2020, as a result of COVID shutdowns in New York, Shanzhai Lyric took over a temporary storefront on Canal Street and opened Canal Street Research Association (CSRA). During their time in the storefront, the artists interacted with fellow merchants; opened their doors to the community; collected memories, souvenirs, and artworks; and restaged iconic Canal Street performances. Under the guise of CSRA, Ming Lin and Alexandra Tatarsky of Shanzhai Lyric have closed the gap from bootleg

archivists to bootleggers themselves, deploying the process as a form of research and understanding. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

> BS: I was first introduced to Shanzhai Lyric through its Instagram account (I assume this might be the case for many familiar with your work). I'd love to hear some background on the project. What led you to archiving and posting this particular genre of graphic T-shirt?

SL: "Shanzhai Lyric" is the name of both the project and the phenomenon we are trying to identify—an anonymously and collectively authored ongoing poem emerging out of the detritus of consumerism. The name Shanzhai Lyric itself can be read as a kind of bootleg, eliding distinction as an attempt at expressing solidarity with the aesthetic philosophy and politics of this hybrid English, while not claiming ownership over the found phrases that we are gathering as our subject.

We are less interested in producing our own bootlegs as we are in identifying shanzhai strategies and sharing them across various platforms through experiments in publication, performance, curation, archive, installation, and conversation. Our aim is to place shanzhai lyrics in dialogue with other poetic and artistic lineages that also experiment with mimicry, wordplay, poetic plagiarism, and nonsense as subversive methods. We do this in a very physical sense, weaving two main threads by which textile becomes text and text becomes textile. With *The Incomplete Poem* we insert shanzhai garments into libraries, art collections, and home closets to comprise an ev-

er-unfinished work, and alongside this we are continuously inserting shanzhai lyrics into publications ranging from poetry zines to fashion magazines to political journals, forming an ongoing piece we call *The Endless Garment*.

Earlier this year we performed a shanzhai poetry-lecture that oscillates between reading off shanzhai T-shirts and reading from theoretical texts in the space of the Stuart Hall Library to contextualize shanzhai writing as a postcolonial literature. Similarly, bringing shanzhai garments into the Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths situates the pieces within a tradition of feminist experimental text and textile.

We have slowly been assembling a collection of garments that are activated in various ways and distributed across various hosting sites that have included galleries, libraries, personal closets—it is always in transit and open to visitors to read, peruse, and wear. It is important to us that this poem is alive and ever-shifting, that it avoids becoming static or institutionalized, that anyone can add to or draw from its resources. Part of creating this lexicon of tactics also involves identifying artists and thinkers who have wittingly or unwittingly employed shanzhai tools of critique and subversion. Spanning different types of spaces is an effort to demonstrate how this work functions among different traditions, settings, and discourses.

While it can be difficult to pinpoint the precise protocols by which shanzhai phrases are produced, and we are mindful of over-ascribing agency, we look to shanzhai lyrics as evidencing strategies of poetic plagiarism that can be helpful for navigating a nonsense world. We employ a mode of reparative reading by viewing these phrases as moments of hopeful breaking with dominant forms.

BS: Is there a difference between "bootlegging" and "shanzhai?"

SL: The word "bootleg" connotes illegality and covert activities—the word literally refers to the practice of transporting illegal liquor in one's boot. Following from this legacy, we are interested in the politics of concealment and in alternate modes of circulation that arise from distributing illicit goods. Our project looks specifically at the language that appears on so-called bootleg T-shirts made in China and transported across the globe. Our aim is firstly to absolve these items from the moralizing condemnation they receive within a Western framework, and to this end we find ideological resonance in the term "shanzhai" from Chinese, rather than the English "bootleg." As writer Yu Hua notes, shanzhai translates directly to "mountain hamlet," suggesting the enticing possibility of absconding from society, with resources in tow to be shared and redistributed. Thus shanzhai goods retain an association with a history of rebellion and the ideals of radical collectivity.

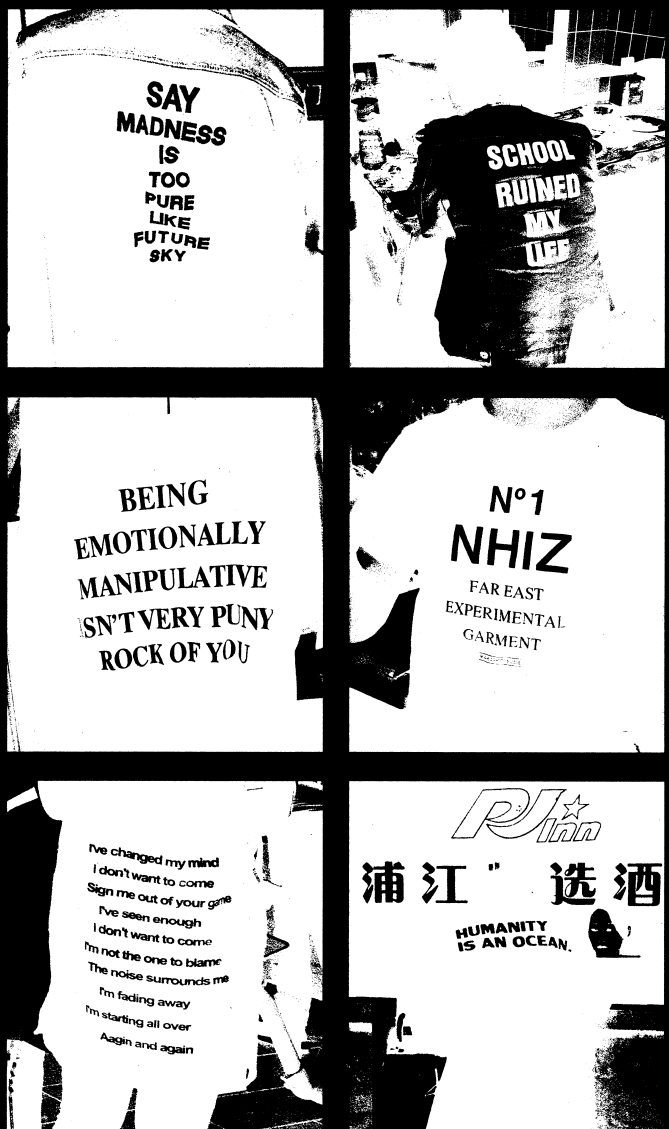
Philosopher Byung-Chul Han traces the legal and art-historical underpinnings of shanzhai back to ancient Chinese legal structures that define a principle of truth as ever-shifting and relative to circumstance, rather than relying on fixed principle. Looking at the tradition of scroll painting, he further roots his definition in Eastern conceptions of art that thwarts the notion of individual authorship by pursuing a process that finds value generated via collective and ongoing inscription. As a scroll painting passes through many hands, its value increases as it continuously changes and expands, literally marked by all those who possess

it. Bearing these two understandings in mind, we are particularly interested in the language borne of a certain breed of counterfeit clothing coming out of China that finds errant English in abundant configurations printed across T-shirts so densely as to form poems and patterns. This project seeks to explore the various strategies of shanzhai as ecstatically illuminating and potentially liberating.

BS: What can we learn from these mistranslated texts?

SL: We want shanzhai lyrics to be viewed not as error-ridden or mistaken but as a rich mode of communicating that speaks with perverse lyricism to the experience of living under contemporary capitalism. In thinking through our own definitions of bootleg, we relish the uniquely shiny and opaque qualities of shanzhai as a possible lens for this critique. Shininess is a characteristic endemic to the fashion industry as that which both draws attention to and conceals the fetish of the commodity. Counterfeit fashion items are often excessively shiny in material, and one could say this attribute attempts to make up for or conceal a lack of quality or authenticity. But in the case of our bootleg T-shirts, which are often flagrant in their "counterfeitedness," we find the opportunity to look more closely at the functions of this shininess. There's the possibility that something else is being reflected and refracted; the shininess of the counterfeit participates in a politics of opacity in that its opulence and

pp. 124–125: Various photographs sourced from Shanzhai Lyric's Instagram account (@shanzhai_lyric)


SAY
MADNESS
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ISN'T VERY PUNY
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N°1
NHIZ
FAR EAST
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GARMENT
I've changed my mind
I don't want to come
Sign me out of your game
I've seen enough
I don't want to come
I'm not the one to blame
The noise surrounds me
I'm fading away
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LET ME KISS
YOU HARD IN THE
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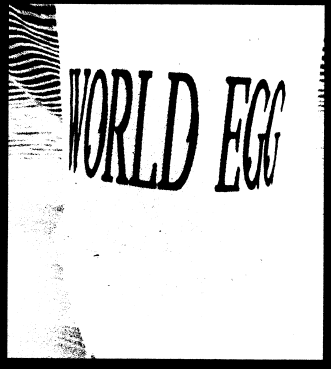

WORLD EGG

seductive nature offers a certain protective shield by nature of its impenetrable sheen. The distracting, scintillating glint obscures an always shifting complexity and so provides cover for its subversive activities. The shiny "broken" English that acts as both decoration and description, indicates rupture at a wider level. The frayed and fraying structures of consumer capitalism rely on a language of smooth lies to sell happiness in the form of a T-shirt; the shanzhai lyric embodies where this smoothness breaks down to reveal the contradictions of the lie and give space to a different truth.

> BS: Today, shanzhai language has been co-opted by the very brands it so often collides with (e.g. Gucci items with the wordmark "GUCCY"). Do you believe these shanzhai phrases will remain a powerful symbol of the rupture that you speak of?

SL: Designations of theft are heavily tied to legacies of colonialism and sustain the myth of rightful ownership by particular corporate entities and nation-states. Subverting this myth is tricky because the fashion industry is cannibalistic in nature: as soon as shanzhai lyrics appear they are just as quickly subsumed by what they have risen to challenge. For instance, a company can capitalize on the cache of shanzhai by making its own cheeky interpretations of shanzhai versions of its products—and thus appear to neuter the destabilizing potential of secondary markets. Bootlegs reflect demand; they actually exist in symbiotic dependence with luxury brands, which need them around in order to demonstrate insatiable desirability.

Instances where designers and producers might use the factory blueprints or machinery towards their own designs are for us creative moments that engage in critique, response, and modification rather than theft of the original. This mode of reading draws into question the whole apparatus by which theft is determined, a notion of criminality designed to sustain the powerful by condemning the sharing of patterns and ideas while protecting corporate theft of time, land, and resources through exploitative, polluting labor practices.

In sharing and admiring this non-normative English we attempt to imagine the possibilities of reordering that can extend beyond aesthetics and language to challenge the configurations of global hierarchies. Shanzhai lyrics encourage us to enjoy and embrace a nonsense language that fosters unlikely collisions between different worlds and registers and destabilizes our notions of a correct, homogenous standard. Working to shift the mechanisms of meaning-making participates in debunking the primacy of the "original" and its attending notions of property and authorship, which are at their core western constructions designed to control and contain the flow of wealth. Shanzhai strategies are necessarily fleeting and slippery, but what they shed light on momentarily is a vital reorientation of values. We find the increasing desire for shanzhai products—and they might be considered more desirable than the original, with higher prices that reflect this—to be an exciting development. To us, this indicates a fatigue and frustration with an older aspi-

p. 128–129: Shanzhai Lyric, *Incomplete Poem* (2015–ongoing), installation view. Photo: Noel Woodford

RICHES
Italy
MILANO
iPone
I'll be back!
I'll be back!
anything
nothing!

TONIGHT
NEED YORK
FREEDOM
YOU'RE CUTE. CAN I KEEP YOU?
JRVGND GENUODENGFS
ALONG
Reflect
OFF
SCHOOL
HERE

rational model whereby a shanzhai product is understood to be "imitating" a luxury brand product. Instead, we see shanzhai as a form of innovation rather than imitation that offers, through shanzhai lyrics, a poetic take on the empty and worn-out signifiers of high fashion.

> BS: The shanzhai lyrics that you collect are not attributed to any one author. Is this symbolic of something larger? A critique of the lone genius myth perhaps?

SL: Shanzhai lyrics are written through poetic collaborations between human and machine. They can be read as recombinatory texts that allow for the deterritorializing of meaning, as analogue hyperlinks that allow for a-linear and non-monolithic viewpoints to collide and intersect, extending and expanding in multiple directions. Following Byung-Chul Han, we view shanzhai lyrics within the lineage of traditional Chinese scroll painting, in which value accrues via collectively-authored, ever-growing loci of inscriptions. This process reflects an alternate model of meaning-making generated through the expression of not just one but a multitude of voices. Such notions of radical collectivity and freedom of expression might be seen paralleling the utopian aspirations of the internet whose endless scroll ideally allows for colliding registers of high and low through a seamless, simultaneous, and ongoing transmission that, as the collective Critical Art Ensemble notes in their work on poetic plagiarism, ultimately renders the notion of a single, original author irrelevant. It is only when companies seek to protect their assets and wield control over the flow of information for

the sake of profit that the question of authorship and credit becomes a problem.

We recently experimented with the format of the scroll in our installation at the Long March Space in Beijing by inviting visitors to access the Open Archive by participating in a collective translation exercise. Shanzhai T-shirts could be taken off the rack and translated in as many ways as there were visitors to the space, and these versions were inscribed on an unfurling paper scroll that became an ever-unfinished document of the process of interpretation. How do we translate one nonsense tongue into another, collectively making sense of "broken" and distorted pieces? How do we find space to write a strange poem together that never ends? Poetry refutes the logic of exchangeability and legibility. We babble and exclaim. Freed, and on and on: FREEDON.

> BS: I'd like to transition to a recent iteration, or "bootleg," of Shanzhai Lyric: Canal Street Research Association (CSRA). Since its inception, CSRA has occupied several physical spaces on Manhattan's Canal Street, a place renowned for counterfeit goods, where you observed, researched, and engaged with the community. As a local New Yorker, it has been incredible to follow the stories and histories you've uncovered, always connecting back to this real vs. fake dichotomy. The project continues to evolve today, but perhaps you could begin by talking about the origins of CSRA.

SL: We had planned to spend much of 2020 tracing the pathway of a shanzhai garment around the

world, through design, production, and various channels of distribution. But then just before we were to set off to Hong Kong, travel became impossible. Everything was canceled and we found ourselves back home in the neighborhood we grew up in, right around Canal Street. A curatorial duo called ACOMPI was planning a group show in an empty Canal Street storefront as part of "On Canal," an art and real estate effort to rebrand Canal Street by filling the storefronts—largely vacant—with artists. ACOMPI asked Shanzhai Lyric to contribute a piece. We mentioned that we'd actually be a lot more interested in a whole storefront—just having a place to hang out on Canal Street for three months and study the ebbs and flows of the blocks, well known for hosting New York City's counterfeit industry. And that would be the piece. Thus, the Canal Street Research Association was born. As the pandemic continued, three months turned into three years. We realized that to study the trade routes, unofficial markets, and global flows of counterfeit goods, we truly never had to leave our block.

BS: Could you talk a bit about the history of Canal Street? Specifically, I'm curious how it became an epicenter of bootlegs.

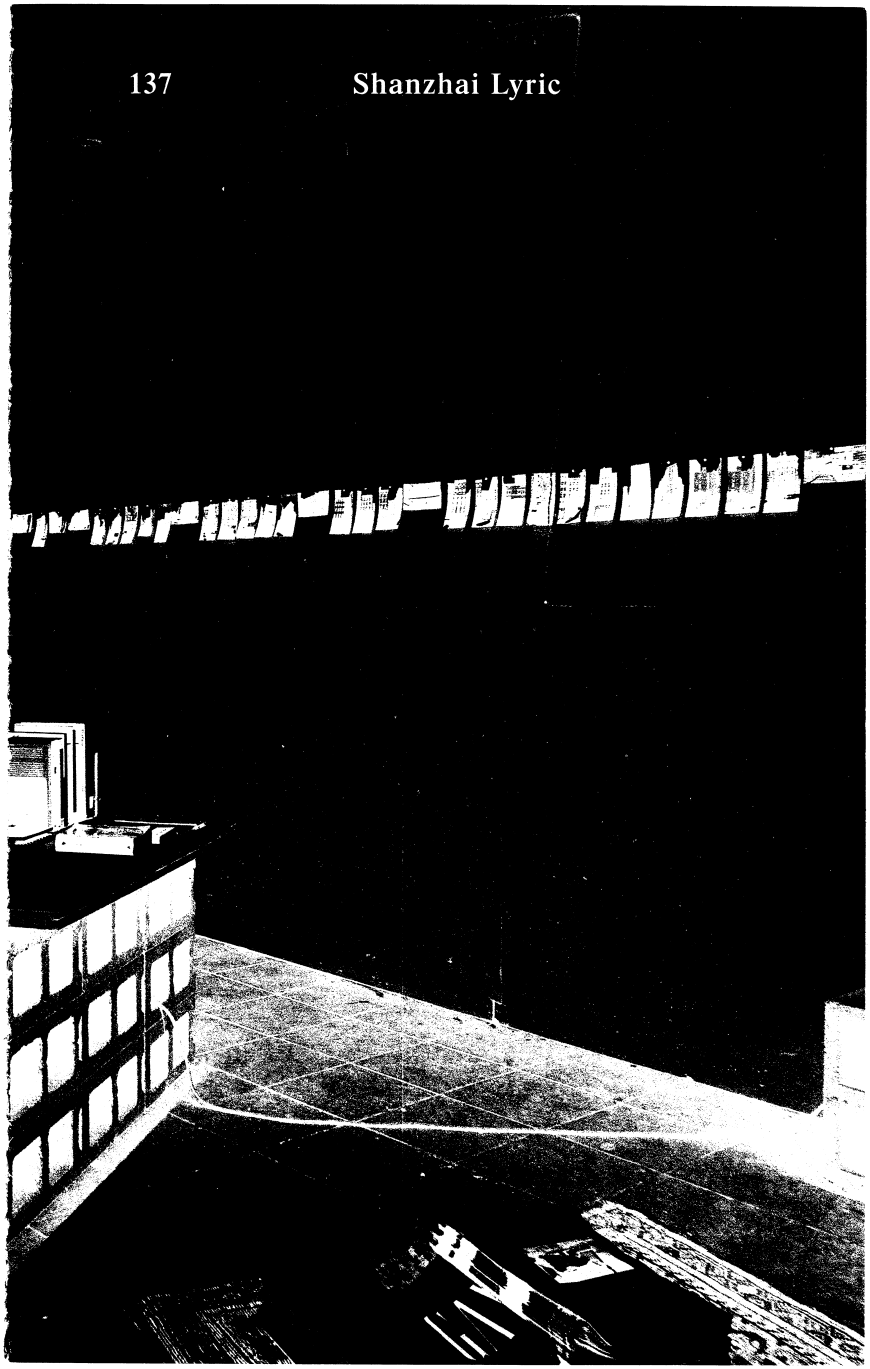
SL: Before Canal Street there was a canal, dug out from a natural stream that flowed from Collect Pond, once lower Manhattan's main freshwater source. As Dutch and English colonizers settled around the pond, they began using Collect Pond as a dumping ground for the tanneries that were the first local industry. So the pond began to overflow with waste—sewage, runoff, animal carcasses—and

the canal siphoned this waste into the East and Hudson rivers that ring Manhattan. Developers tried to disguise the horrible stench of shit and decay with rows of riverside trees to turn the canal into a riverside promenade, but it didn't work and so the pond was drained, filled in, and built upon. This made for perpetually unstable conditions. The jail that sits where Collect Pond once was is constantly leaking and sinking. The decaying matter in the shoddy landfill led to fetid, unhygienic conditions and by the eighteen-hundreds, the area became known as the infamous "5 Points," home to various marginalized communities, first African Americans and then waves of immigrants who ran the thriving street markets and food carts. These unofficial markets were—and are—often the only pathway to financial independence for marginalized communities that lack the resources to own property or work legally. And yet they have been shunned and criminalized since their inception.

There is a pretty direct line from this early history to Canal Street today. The street has always served as a landing place for different groups that have been pushed into semi-legal industries due to a system that marginalizes them. It is our understanding that unofficial import channels were established between the U.S. and Asia during and following the Vietnam War, when Canal Street became a hub for army surplus, and the counterfeit industry took shape sometime in the 1980s. It has become a lifeline for many immigrant communities, today mostly hailing from South China and West Africa,

pp. 134–137: Shanzhai Lyric's Canal Street storefront (2020)
Photo: Daniel Terna

BRECHT AND EAST
ASIAN THEATRE
ANTONY TATLOW
JAK WAI WONG



who engage in a complex cross-lingual collaboration along the block.

> BS: The threat of gentrification seems to weigh heavy on Canal Street given its location in Manhattan and proximity to so much luxury retail. Was this tension perceptible? As gentrification is so often introduced through artists and art spaces moving into a neighborhood, I'm curious how you were welcomed? How did you connect with locals?

SL: Well, we would say Canal Street is notable for how well it has *resisted* gentrification. Neighboring SoHo and TriBeCa have come to represent the artist gentrification narrative: post-industrial urban factories converted first into semi-legal artist live/work spaces and then into luxury lofts for the rich. Further East, the ethnic enclaves of Little Italy, Chinatown, and the Lower East Side have maintained their neighborhood identities somewhat through dedicated community organizing but have also become some of the priciest areas in the country. So the Canal Street environs are already fully gentrified, but Canal Street itself has in some ways resisted this shift. Its swampy, seedy origins and reputation persists. It is one of the few remaining places in NYC that abound with cross-cultural, interclass contact and communication.

It was important to us that our space was both intriguing and inviting. Because it was a bit unclear what was happening there, people would often come inside to try to understand. A store can be more welcoming than a gallery because a store has a script that everyone knows, whereas a gallery can feel

alienating due to its obscure codes of behavior. People would come in and be both frustrated and delighted that nothing was for sale. And in this confusion, we'd have the chance to tell them we were studying Canal Street and invite them into that research by asking what brought them to the block. We learned many secret histories this way.

Anyone could hang out in the space to have a tea and get warm. Anyone could use the bathroom or the internet. Anyone could leave some items there if they needed a place to store goods. We also hosted concerts and drum lessons on the steps of Canal Rubber next door and we turned our storefront window into an outdoor movie screen so that vendors could watch movies while they worked. We always paired one short experimental film with one longer Hollywood flick to entice an audience with diverse tastes. This turned the street itself into a space of gathering and relaxation where the different communities—longtime residents, newer transplants, local artists, business owners, street vendors, and passersby—could ideally get more comfortable with one another. But it took many months of spending all day every day on one single city block for these relationships to grow.

At the same time, we have always been aware that we inhabited a storefront for no rent as part of a sticky and seductive partnership between art and real estate. In this case, a consortium of landlords welcomed arts programming as a way to make their vacant properties look more active and high-end to attract commercial tenants that would displace the artists. We often say that we are the trees planted along the canal to accelerate development and to cover up its stench. So this question has been central to our research: can artists play a meaningful role in

cities where they are so often used to rebrand and upscale neighborhoods? We look to the philosophy, poetics, and politics of shanzhai for answers. Creative theft can be a way to redistribute the resources.

> BS: With the initial CSRA office you re-staged several events, shows, and works that had previously occurred on Canal Street. How did these reenactments change or affect your relationship to the original? As a methodology, how might you consider bootlegging as a form of learning or tool for research?

SL: Despite Canal Street being one of NYC's major thoroughfares, there is no definitive history of the street. And this is largely because it is a liminal zone, rife with semi-legal activities that folks are loath to disclose. We began to think that re-staging or bootlegging ephemeral moments in the block's history could be a means of surfacing buried histories. And one thing we noticed was that a lot of the street's many layered past was encapsulated in the works of artists who were drawn to the neighborhood by the raw materials and cheap rents. We consider copying to be a form of learning. The bootleg is a mode of study, commentary, and critique.

Many folks on the block who are eager to chat with us and share their experiences are less comfortable doing so on record. So many vendors and purveyors on Canal Street are also artisans, tailors, singers, andactors that a dream of ours has been to create a semi-fictional history of Canal Street with everyone on the block. In this way, collaborators might feel more liberated to talk freely about their lives, avoiding self-incrimination be-

cause the line between real and fake, fact and fiction would be blurry. Bootleg as protection.

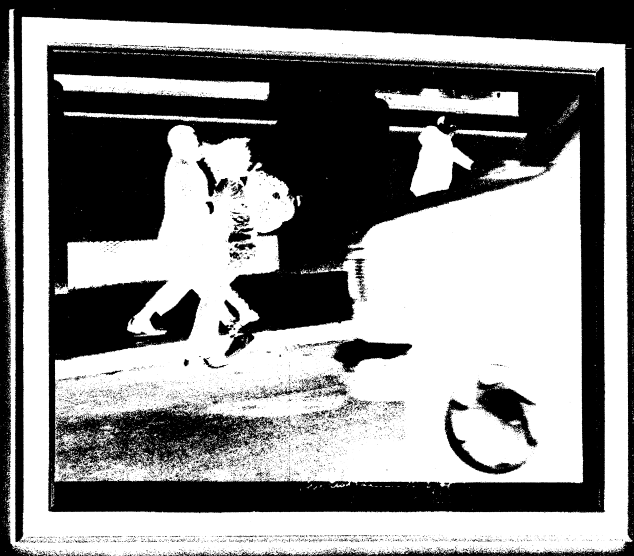
In New York City, we were delighted to learn that street portraiture is one form of vending that does not require a license because it is protected as freedom of expression. And so you see, art is a way of survival. Bootleg as portrait.

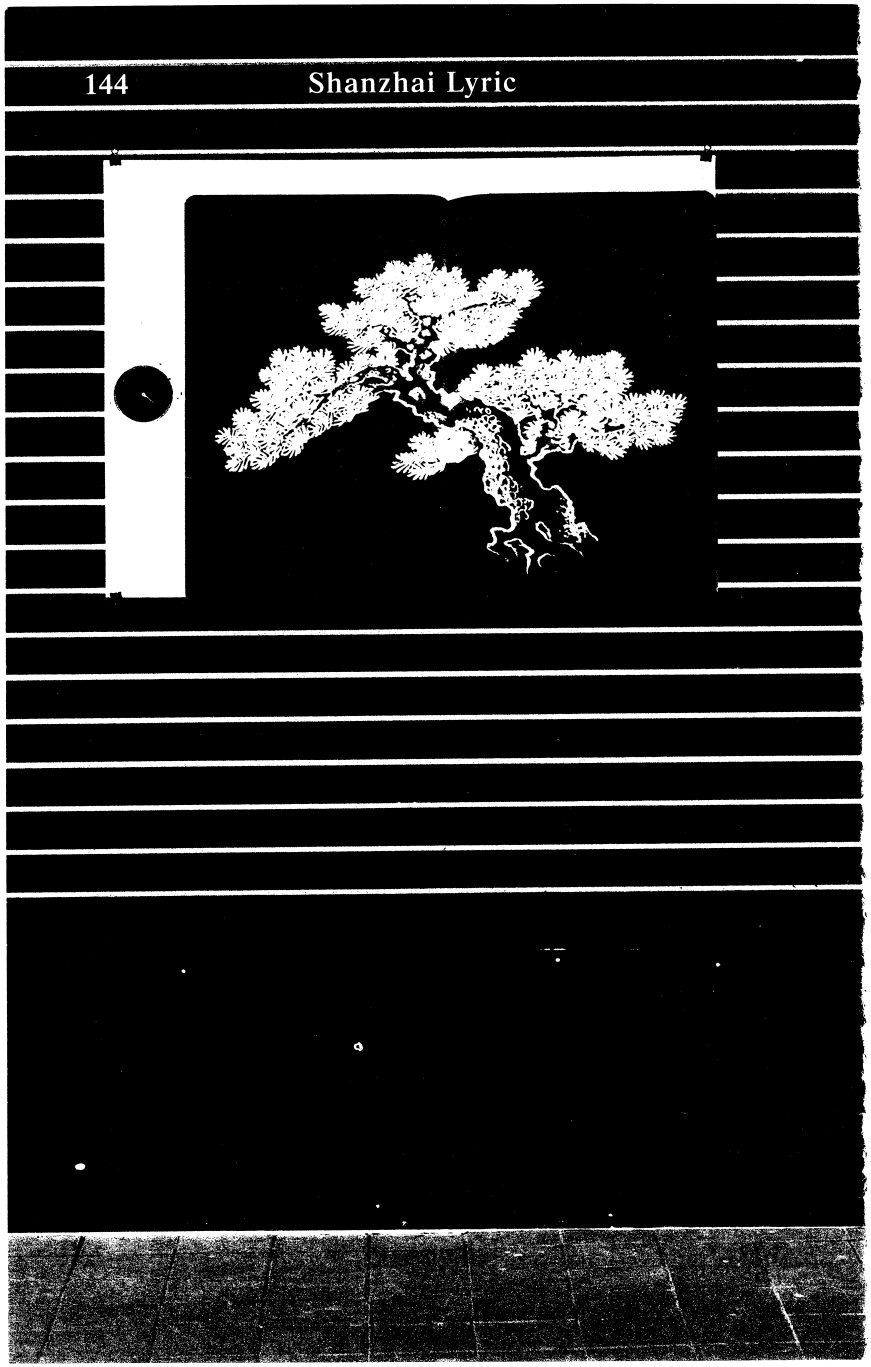
> BS: In addition to performances, you began to collect objects which amounted to an "office art collection." I was hoping you could talk through two or three of these objects and their relationship to the history of Canal Street?

SL: In our storefront office, artworks accumulated in what we called the office hamlet. Often these were by friends and local artists whose work touched on similar themes, and who inspire us.

Bon Lee, *Annie*: One day, at the entrance to Chinatown Building Supply just down the alley from Canal Street, we noticed a wall of photographs. The woman at the till told us they were for sale and had been taken by the shop's proprietor, Bon Lee. Amongst many sunsets and landscapes, one of the photos stood out to us. It appeared to depict a car nearly crashing into some pedestrians. The shopkeeper told us this image was from the filming of the 2014 remake of the musical *Annie*, in which a pivotal scene unfolds right in front of the store. The man in the photo was actually Jamie Foxx's stunt double. So what we were looking at was a reproduction of a photo of a double in a re-

pp. 142–143: Bon Lee, *Annie* (2014). Photo: Daniel Terna





make—of a movie about a greedy industrialist with a heart of gold. We purchased this work and it became the first item in our prized office art collection.

Max Guy, *Love and Barley*: Max Guy is a Chicago-based artist who grew up in the neighborhood. His work *Love and Barley* is a bootleg he made of a Japanese landscape painting. According to philosopher Byung-Chul Han, the Chinese concept of shanzhai has its roots in Eastern traditions of landscape painting where emptiness in the composition leaves space for multiple authors to inscribe themselves into it. We try to let the project be guided by these collectively generated landscapes.

Still from *Film About a Woman Who...* (1974, dir. Yvonne Rainer), featuring Dempster Leech: In reviewing the history of intellectual property law on the block, we came across the evocative Dempster Leech. His name kept coming up as a private detective in news articles describing Canal Street busts. However, when googling his name something else interesting came up. Before his work as a PI, Leech was an actor and part of the downtown avant garde film scene. For instance, he starred in Yvonne Rainer's *Film About a Woman Who...* from 1974. Later, filmmaker Monica Scharf made a short documentary about Leech in which she draws out the connection between his former life as an actor and as a PI. Leech claims that it was because of his frustration with the fakeness of the acting world that he wanted to embed himself in the world of counterfeit busting. He wanted the scenes to be real. And yet, a lot of his work as a PI required him

p. 144: Max Guy, *Love and Barley* (2019). Photo: Daniel Terna

to act undercover. To take on fake personas. At our second location in an empty office building on the Canal, we screened *Film About a Woman Who...* paired with *PI Shorts*, followed by a conversation with Leech and Scharf about the politics of the bootleg. We keep a still from Rainer's film featuring Leech as part of our ever-shifting office art collection.

> BS: I've been interested in the ways bootlegs create or reinforce community. There is perhaps no better place to understand this than on Canal Street. In what ways did you find that bootlegs hold this community together? What sort of protections does the community have in place from outside forces such as police raids?

SL: We came into our storefront space in the fall of 2020, in that first pandemic winter, following a summer of protest and uprising for racial justice. The entire block was boarded up by landlords fearful of looting and all the blank plywood "protecting" the empty property had turned the city into a blank scroll. There was a notable absence of cops and it became clear that their job was to protect property—not people. With businesses closed, they had nothing to do. And in the absence of cops, vibrant street life returned.

In this moment, a lot of things felt possible. We'd both long been priced out of the neighborhood and for the first time in years we were able to spend every day in the neighborhood we grew up in, talking to our neighbors. Our storefront had a perfect window onto the block and faced an active street corner where vendors, mostly from West Africa, conduct business and hang out. We were very intrigued by

their pursuits and they were very intrigued by ours. This mutual curiosity was an opening for conversation—coupled with the fact that both of our industries were pretty much decimated by the pandemic so we all had a lot of free time to hang out and talk.

We learned that there is a long history on Canal Street of ethnic associations that operate as mutual aids, pooling resources to help members buy a home or pay funerary expenses. On Canal Street, when a police raid decimates someone's inventory, the community of vendors will sometimes help them acquire stock to start anew.

> BS: In its current form, CSRA is located in the office of a basement... almost *becoming* a bootleg in the underground or shadow market. Fom working with bootlegs at a distance (as archivists with Shanzhai Lyric) to employing bootlegging as a methodology (through performances on Canal Street) to now working as a bootleg in some ways, how has your understanding of the act or object evolved? How do you understand bootlegs differently now?

SL: Yes, we are currently located in the basement of an arts organization called Canal Projects, as official artists/archivists in residence. In some sense we have in fact become legitimate, rather than illegitimate or bootleg, and it is this tension we are interested in. We are a fake organization that has become real. Everything is bootleg.

Title page (p. 118): Text taken from a photograph from Shanzhai Lyric's Instagram account (@shanzhai_lyric)